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AUTHOR Appleton, Matthew
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ABSTRACT

This article describes the educational philosophy and practice at Summerhill School, England, an alternative school for elementary school-age through secondary school-age children established in 1921. The school's guiding principle is that education must respect the nature of childhood. Following a brief description of the school's founding by A. S. Neill and its overall structure, the paper describes how the school emphasizes the integrity of children. Integrity in children, when allowed to take its own course, can regulate itself according to its own needs. Traditional schooling, no matter how liberal, cuts children off from the nature within themselves and alienates them from the natural ecology of childhood. At Summerhill, new students follow a pattern of gradual realization that culture no longer binds them, a period of rebellion and breaking out, and finally a period of healing and renewed wholeness that brings maturity. The school attempts to follow children's instincts. Brief stories of the healing or learning experiences of actual students are provided. Summerhill functions primarily to protect and nourish the integrity of the child before possible damage by culture can be done. (JB)

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SCHOOL AS COMMUNITY:

THE ECOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD - A VIEW FROM SUMMERHILL SCHOOL*
by Matthew Appleton

Over the past decade or so mechanized Western culture has begun to realize that it must work with nature, rather than against it. If humanity is to survive as a species. The stirring of a new consciousness is beginning to make itself felt, in small, somewhat stumbling ways, as we find ourselves facing a colossal crisis that we can no longer turn back from but must begin to grope our way through as best we can. It is becoming more and more apparent that there is an inherent wisdom in nature which we have ignored for too long. Our ignorance has pushed us closer and closer to the brink of catastrophe.

My concern here though is not with the environment or the atmosphere, which merely reflect the state of our own sickness. Our greatest stumbling block lies in our war with nature within ourselves. In particular I am concerned with our war with nature within the child, for it is in children that nature comes into our culture most immediately, spontaneously and alive. It is in our dealings with children that we wage this war with nature most arduously, and yet, most sublimely. In this arena we are probably more ignorant of nature's wisdom than in any other, and, in all good faith, we know not what we do.

To look into a new born baby's eyes is like looking into the depths of the cosmos. All the wisdom of the great sages seems to gravitate there, unspoken, unchallenged, alive. Watch the rise and fall of the abdomen and chest, it rolls and ripples in a graceful, wavelike motion, unified and unlaboured. Look at children in play, rooted in the newness and the nowness of the moment, lucid eyes and loose limbs, glowing with life and vitality. Look at what we make of them. Watch that glow begin to fade. See the sullenness and furtiveness that springs up in the eyes, the rigidity around the limbs that replaces natural, graceful movement with more angular expressions. See the breathing falter, become unsure of itself, grow shallow. Observe the absorption of the moment disintegrate into self consciousness, awkwardness and nervous listlessness.

What are we doing? What has been done to us? Is this nature at work, or are we working against nature? If we are to begin to answer these questions we must move education beyond the contours of its present course, at one moment moving towards liberalism, the next towards authoritarianism, and floundering on both banks. We must consider, instead, a new course of questioning, concerned not with how we can best lead the child to conform to the equations of our culture, but, rather, with the ecology of childhood: how can we best nurture it and allow it to take its natural course? At this point of departure we must give nature's wisdom the greatest scope possible, and in doing so admit our own ignorance. We must focus, not so intently on what we can teach children, but also on what we can learn from them.

One experiment which encompassed such an approach was Summerhill School, founded way back in 1921, by A.S.Neill, as a reaction to his own upbringing and his experiences as a young teacher in Scotland. Instead of being crammed into classrooms and having endless facts thrust at them, under the shadow of the strap and the stick, he wanted to create an environment where children could grow up free of fear, and enjoy their childhood in its own right. He saw childhood as more than an enslaved precondition to adult life. It was clear to him that children were emotionally crippled by enforced morality which created conflicts in them. By removing the taboos which caused them he sought to remove the conflicts. At Summerhill you were free to do what you liked as long as it did not interfere with anyone else. You did not have to go to lessons if you did not want to. That was no one's business but your own. The school was there to suit the child, rather than the child having to suit the school.

The school was also self-governing. There were weekly meetings whereby the laws were made by everyone, not just the staff. Everyone had one vote, from the youngest child to Neill himself. All had an

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equal voice. Rather than trying to guide the meeting with his own ideas, Neill would often sit back and see what the children came up with, or make silly proposals to see how the children would respond. Even his serious proposals were sometimes voted out. That was all part of self-government. People who broke laws or interfered with other people's freedom could be 'brought up' at the meeting, and on the one person one vote system, could be fined. These were usually small money fines, or a social fine, such as picking up litter. Neill noted that the children usually veered towards leniency, perhaps because there was no clear division between the miscreants and their judges; they were in a constant state of interchangeability. Neither were staff exempt from being brought up and fined at the meeting.

Given that the children had so much freedom and were able to guide the school in the manner they found most suitable, it was possible to observe much about the nature of children that is usually hidden or lost in an environment governed by adults. The Summerhill experience seemed to belie the generally accepted view that, without discipline and morality, children would become lazy and insolent, even reverting to an inherent, primeval savagery, such as William Golding portrayed in his novel *Lord of the Flies*. Indeed, what Neill observed was that at Summerhill so-called lazy children became actively involved in community life. 'Insolent' children became tolerant and respectful of other people, and instead of reverting to savagery, children reverted to what Neill believed to be an inherent 'goodness'.

Although Neill died in 1973, Summerhill continues along the same lines that he established seventy years ago. It puts its faith in the 'goodness' of the child, though I prefer to use the word 'integrity' instead of 'goodness'. By integrity I mean the integrated wholeness of the child, which, when allowed to take its own course, can regulate itself as is most fitting to its own needs, and function as a social being, responsive to the needs of others, and open to life and love. There is still much that can be learned from observing children in a Summerhill environment. As an ex-Summerhillian, now Summerhill parent, said at a recent conference, 'You don't learn about the nature of chickens by studying battery hens'. So, in conventional schooling, the ways in which we damage the integrity of the child are not always obvious, whilst at Summerhill the hurt soon begins to surface as part of the healing process. This may manifest itself in many ways.

Left to their own devices children will follow their excitement wherever it takes them. They will express their excitement in sound and movement. The compulsory classroom, however liberal it may be, does not allow this natural excitement to flow as it should. To still their excitement, which is the wellspring of their well-being, children must stiffen and contract against it. They must tighten muscle, and breathe shallowly to quieten the thrill of life that pulses and streams throughout their bodies. In this way, children learn, literally, to cut off from nature in themselves, and live a facade instead. How, and to what degree, this manifests itself, is dependent on many factors. But manifest it does, when and wherever natural processes are sacrificed on the altar of culture.

When children arrive at Summerhill, for the first few weeks, they tend to maintain the superficial facade of the 'nice', quiet, 'good' boy or girl, which is the approved model of our society. When the realization breaks through that approval does not depend on maintaining the facade, then the natural excitement and integrity of the child begins to reinstate itself. At first this may take many bizarre forms, again depending on the form and degree to which the child's integrity has been insulted. All the pent up excitement rushes to the surface, and with it all the emotions that accompanied and were held in check by the original blocking. The child may begin to express anger (especially against adults), or sorrow, or make various statements of independence, such as not washing. Some children become abusive, antisocial or obsessive in some way, for example, breaking into things and compulsive stealing. This period, in which all the pent up excitement and emotion begins to come out is the period in which Golding's *Lord of the Flies* might justifiably be set. But the story does not end here.....

No one at Summerhill tries to moralize or philosophize to the children, nor to politicize or spiritualize them. All problems are dealt with practically in the meetings. What we find is that in time, as the suppressed excitement is expressed, and the child's integrity is restored, s/he is able to regulate his or her life in a more harmonious and responsible way. Usually, this is with a maturity that children who have not been allowed to 'break out' rarely demonstrate. The child's faith in his or her own natural core is reinstated, and s/he is able to act with a deeper self-understanding, giving a voice once more to the inherent wisdom with which nature conducts itself.

I am not proposing that conventional schooling is necessarily the source of the child's difficulties, but that it tends to compound them. More often than not the problems are rooted in the family. The attitudes, and inability of the parents to live their own lives fully, along with a myriad of cultural considerations, wound the child's integrity. The most distinctive aspect of schooling at Summerhill is that it is based on choice. The school also has a wider function, though, as a sort of extended family, an international community of children. At present we have children from France, Spain, Germany, Morocco, Indonesia, Japan, England and America. Children come from many backgrounds, some well off, some not so well off. Some come with their parents' blessings, and their integrity has been respected and nurtured throughout. Some have been SENT to the school as a last resort: their parents do not know what else to do with them. The integrity of these children is no longer intact and their confused attempts to reinstate it is problematic at home or at school.

The degree to which the family is able to embrace the integrity of its children reveals itself in the ease with which the child is able to adjust to freedom. Conversely parents often state they have learnt much about themselves by their children being at Summerhill. As the child's integrity grows more complete so does the family's. Where the family is not able to meet the emerging of the child's integrity a conflict situation arises. I think now of a teenage girl who has been with us for over three years now. Every time she tries to establish her integrity the parents pull the carpet out from beneath her feet. They tell her she is stupid. They belittle the school, the only place she has known any happiness, and threaten to withdraw her when she asserts herself at home during the holidays. In such a case the child is caught in a great gulf between the school, where she is always on the verge of up, and the home, where she is having to clamp shut again.

Usually though, there is a powerful healing period that takes place between the ages of seven, when we first accept children, and thirteen. Experience has taught us not to take on new children over the age of twelve. The release of pent up excitement, combined with the powerful biological drives of puberty, is a recipe for disaster. By the time children have reached adolescence at Summerhill they have already lived out their 'delinquent' period, and begun to take on the responsibilities of running the community. It is the big kids who sort out the disputes amongst the smaller kids, put them to bed, organize social events, chair the meetings, and generally have the strongest voice in the community.

There is something to be gleaned from this. It tells us something about the ecology of childhood that could be of great significance in a society where adolescent discontent and delinquency is such a problem. Just as we have begun to realize the ramifications of the abuse of nature around us, so we can begin to tackle the problems of the abuse of nature within us. In all areas of life our injured nature is showing us the same signs. The booming industry in therapy is another facet of the same picture. People are beginning to voice their sense of loss, to articulate the emptiness they feel inside them, and rediscover the hurt child frozen within. Moreover, this new therapy industry is not so much aimed at the people society would deem as 'victims', but at those who by society's measure are successes: the up and coming, the well to do, the professional.

The question of health is a far reaching one. We have learnt enough to know that wherever nature's wisdom is ignored, then nature's discontent finds a voice. My definition of health here is not simply a lack of the symptoms of sickness, but the ability to fully establish one's own personal integrity.

WhenNeill founded Summerhill he stated he wanted a school that would 'follow the child'. Allowed to define his or her own needs the child often displays an instinctive intelligence that our cultural creeds do not recognize. A young boy came to the school suffering from chronic asthma. Back in Japan his mother did not acknowledge his problem and would leave him alone in the house without medication, so that he had a great deal of anxiety about returning home for the holidays. At Summerhill he continued to have very severe attacks, but was able to enjoy a fairly full life, playing and socializing with other children. He also came to develop very trusting relationships with the adults at the school. As I got to know him, and he became more relaxed with me, he would take my fingers in his mouth and suck on them. As he did this, he began to spontaneously kick his legs and move his arms like a baby, and make deep, gurgling sounds in his chest and throat. It became clear to me that he was living out an earlier phase in his life that he had missed out on, and in doing so was re-establishing his integrity, and with it his potential for health. His asthma has not disappeared, but since that time he has not suffered from the severe attacks he had before.

On another occasion a child seeing a young goat being fed with a baby bottle asked if he might have one himself. Within a week half the community had baby bottles, and visitors to the Saturday night meeting were surprised to see even big sixteen year old lads sucking away. Apart from the odd bout of leg pulling no one was really derisive about this temporary reversion to infantile desire, and a definite air of contentment permeated the community at this time. As the main purveyor of bottles, though, I had attracted a somewhat notorious reputation at the local chemist's.

Parental anxiety is a great source of injury to the integrity of the child. Children with over-protective parents inevitably spend their first few weeks at Summerhill bumping into things, falling over and generally injuring themselves. They are uncoordinated, clumsy and have lost their trust in their own ability to function coherently. In time their integrity heals itself, and they are off in the woods, climbing trees and running around, as nimble and agile as nature intended. The children are not supervised in their activities as they are in most schools, and yet the accident rate is very low, despite the potential dangers that exist in such exhilarating adventures. A teacher, visiting the school recently, became so anxious that she nearly had to leave a room in which children of all shapes and sizes were milling around with hot mugs of tea in their hands. This is an everyday event at Summerhill, and as yet, no one has been scalded.

Equally, parental anxieties about learning poses problems for children, who if uninterfered with would learn much quicker. Many children do not attend lessons with any regularity for years, and yet, when they are motivated from within, they learn quickly and efficiently. When children are allowed to follow their excitement things happen naturally and spontaneously. One of the greatest sources of anxiety of our times is the fear of what we do not know, and yet this is one of the foundation stones of our education. If you do not know it is because you are stupid, or lazy. If you do not know, you will not pass your exams. Motivated by the fear of not knowing children are continually being stuck in frames of reference that are quickly becoming outdated. At a time, when especially in the sciences, humanity is making vast leaps into the unknown, surely it is time that education began to function around the desire to learn, rather than the fear of not knowing. Again, child nature is not understood, and educationists and parents are stuck in the belief that children need to be pushed to learn. This inevitably damages the child's natural desire to learn. Freedom to not attend classes implies a certain faith in the child's inherent will to learn, and with the confidence which arises from this faith, children at Summerhill tend to learn in a relatively short time what it takes conventionally raised children years to learn.

Summerhill has been accused of neglecting the academic, and concentrating on the emotional. This is true only in the sense that, asNeill stated, "If you look after the emotions, the intellect will take care of itself." What is important is not how much a child can learn in a given time, but that the child's desire to learn, when s/he is ready to, is not damaged. The emotionally whole child learns at a ferocious speed what is relevant to his or her own needs at the time. Even if the bulk of academic learning occurs after the conventional period allocated for education, it will always be achieved more fully if entered into wholeheartedly. The child who has been pushed into the academic labyrinth before s/he is ready, often spends more time and energy trying to thrash through dead ends than s/he does making the progress s/he would if nature was allowed to take its own course.

An eleven year old boy, whose parents were very anxious about his inability to read, came to me for private lessons. A series of bad experiences with teachers at previous schools had left his self-esteem very low, and he believed himself to be stupid. After a few lessons I realized he was insincere in his desire to read, but was more concerned with trying to please his anxious parents. I suggested to him, that instead of labouring the point, I would read him a book by an American Indian Medicine Man, which he had showed interest in before. Soon he was looking over my shoulder and picking out words that he would never have been able to decipher whilst the motivating factor was the pressure of HAVING to learn to read.

Another boy, of about the same age, whose parents were both ex-Summerhillians, and supported him for who he was, decided, completely of his own accord, that he wanted to learn Japanese. He asked one of his Japanese friends to teach him. Within a couple of months he was able to read, write, speak and understand large chunks of the Japanese language. It is my own belief that if children were allowed to follow their excitement unhindered by unnecessary adult interference they would each find the natural genius within them. Genius has its root in genuineness, and if children were allowed to do what they were genuinely interested in their genius would emerge. If doing and being were not so severely segregated, nature would be more fully able to express its inherent wisdom.

Given that we live in a consumer society, and that children at Summerhill are able to dictate their own laws by which to live, it is also interesting that expensive toys and television play a very small part in the children's lives. There are various self-imposed regulations about the viewing of television, and it would seem that most children prefer the real contact of living human beings to the pseudo intimacies of the T.V. tube. Television is watched, and enjoyed, as are computer games, but they do not take on the all pervasive distraction to real life that they do in so many homes.

Although Summerhill plays a therapeutic role for many children, its primary function is prophylactic. The principle of the school is to protect and nourish the integrity of the child before the damage is done, although in practice this is rarely the case. Experience has shown that even though children whose integrity has been severely undermined can benefit from the school, it may distract the community from meeting the needs of the other children, to whom freedom comes more readily. The school's commitment to children with 'problems' must always be relative to the make up of the community as a whole. Essentially though, Summerhill is Utopian in its approach. It demonstrates a natural wisdom, an inherent integrity in children, that goes way beyond the vision of contemporary society. It exposes our ignorance in such matters, and raises questions that many would prefer not to ask. Often it reminds us of the forgotten pains of our own childhoods, which we have learnt to sublimate into the social fabrications of our culture.

What Summerhill advocates it has consistently lived throughout its seventy years of existence. It is no mere theory. Even in this, though, Summerhill has had to accept many compromises, which inevitably limit its scope in such a demonstration of child nature. If possible the school would only accept the children of parents who fully believe in, and support, the integrity of their children. As yet, though, such parents are rare. To meet the demands of the society we live in, the school provides supply exam courses for its pupils. The children are well aware that they must pass exams to make their way in the world. Mostly they do well in their exams, but this emphasis on education through fear of not knowing cannot but have some effect on their natural desire to learn.

As well as endowing children with an inherent wisdom nature has also endowed children with sexuality, which, in adolescence, is at its most intense. Unfortunately, the law of the land has decreed that this sexuality should not express itself in the fullness it deserves. Anthropological evidence suggests that all cultures which have been affirmative towards childhood and adolescent sexuality, there is a distinct lack of promiscuity, sexual perversion, venereal disease, rape, or the subjugation of women and children. Our culture is riddled with all these things, along with a generally immature, unhealthy attitude towards our sexual feelings. Nature expresses itself sexually in its young. We are the only species to deny that sexuality, and the only species to suffer from sexual anxiety. Perhaps, again, we should start to respect nature, rather than work against it.

We live in a time when the educational world is moving more and more towards rigid, academic standards, metered out by consistent testing at ever younger ages. The ethic of the fear of not knowing is becoming more deeply entrenched than ever. It is ironic that at a time when the British education system is moving ever closer to the Japanese system, nearly half the pupils at Summerhill are Japanese. If it wanted to, the school could fill itself twice over with Japanese children, and is frequently visited by Japanese educationalists who are looking to Summerhill to solve some of the grave problems they are now beginning to admit exist in their schools. Socially, children in our culture have more the status of commodities than living, feeling beings in their own right. They must be 'presentable'. They must be 'sweet' and 'loveable', like E.T., or Bambi. Children's clothes become more expensive, as they become more geared towards adult aesthetics and less to the needs of the children. The demands to stay clean, and 'be good' are more palpable than ever. Even if this is not the everyday reality, it is the model by which success is measured.

The way of life that Summerhill demonstrates cannot be simply reduced to yet another form of 'alternative education.' It is an attitude towards children, and ultimately, an attitude towards life. Personally, I would no more desire to impose my values on a child than I would lock up a homosexual, deprive women of the vote, or subjugate another race because its beliefs or skin colour were different from mine. Better a child be totally absorbed in reading the Dandy or the Beano than forced to read a Shakespeare play s/he is not interested in. The Bash Street Kids have as much a place in the scheme of things as Hamlet. Let the child follow his or her own excitement and an interest in and love of life will always be there. When we consistently interrupt the flow of their excitement we fragment our children's integrity, we cut them off from the nature they are rooted in. When we begin to study the ecology of

childhood we find a deep wellspring of wisdom that the over cultivation of conventional education largely ignores and obscures. Throughout the planet nature is protesting at our treatment of it, not only in the atmosphere and environment, but in our schools and homes too. When we have learnt to acknowledge the wisdom of nature in our children, our understanding of nature's wisdom in the world and in ourselves will deepen of its own accord. We have already made the small step of advocating free range chickens; when will we make the great step of advocating free range children?

Matthew Appleton is a houseparent at Summerhill School. His splendid article is reproduced here with his kind permission.